

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

You will recall that John's gospel is referred to as the Fourth Gospel, while the other three are called the Synoptics. This has to do with the fact that the Synoptics have a lot in common including their likely sources while John's account is different in "its structure, its tone, and the picture it gives of Jesus' self-revelation." We often hear it referred to as the "spiritual Gospel" because it deals so clearly with "issues of the origination and destination of Jesus from heaven and the crucial role of faith in Jesus' life." But alongside of this spiritual interpretation of Jesus in John's gospel we find "a story of growing conflict, of differing choices about how to understand Jesus, and finally of his self-sacrifice in the name of love for all humanity.

John's gospel is also the gospel of "signs." These signs are miracles that point to Jesus as the Messiah. Most of these signs are found in the early chapters of the gospel, so the first eleven (11) are called the "book of signs." Whereas the Synoptics view the ministry of Jesus as occurring within approximately one year's time, John sees a three-year active ministry. There is also a good deal of dualism in John's account. For example, there is the stark contrast between *light* and *darkness*. For John, there are no subtleties in these dualisms: it is either one or the other. When there is opposition to Jesus' ministry here, those who do not accept him are viewed as people of the darkness; those who accept Jesus are on the side of light.

There is strong opposition to Jesus throughout John's gospel, and John refers to the enemies of Jesus as "the Jews." This is unfortunate in that it gives a very distorted view of what John is presenting and because these oversimplifications can lead to genuine harm. In this case, that harm has historically been the outcome of deep-seated anti-Semitism. But what we know about John and his community tells us that John is referring only to those very orthodox Jews who so opposed the Jesus-followers that they expelled them from the synagogues. Thus, "the Jews" really refers to a small minority of those who identified with the people of Israel. Since John tended to view things in dualistic terms, these religious leaders who opposed Jesus were seen as being part of a large category of people who were grouped together on the side of darkness.

In John's gospel, "intermediaries are needed to come to the proper faith about Jesus." For example, "John points two of (his own) disciples to the Lamb of God; Andrew brings Simon to Jesus; Philip tells Nathanael about the promised one from Nazareth." Even Jesus himself serves as an intermediary between humanity and God the Father. But, most importantly, there is John himself who is a key intermediary in leading those who were hearing the message of Jesus to a true faith. In the prologue (or introductory poem), these intermediaries are invoked when the author says that his gospel is written "so

that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

On the Third Sunday in Advent, we encounter the relationship between John (called the Baptist in the other accounts) and Jesus in our appointed lectionary gospel lesson. Here he is not referred to as a baptizer. Rather, he is called a witness. The verb for “to witness” (or testify) occurs 31 times in John’s gospel vs. its being virtually non-existent in the other gospel accounts. The noun for “witness” is hard to even find in the Synoptics, but in John it (along with the Greek word for “one who testifies”) appears 45 times. The Jewish religious leaders are sent to question John. They essentially put him on trial where he functions as *a witness to the coming one*. In John’s gospel we learn more about who John is not than we do about *who he actually was*. “He wasn’t the light; he wasn’t the Messiah; he wasn’t Elijah; he wasn’t a prophet.” So, then, who was he? Well, for one thing, this negation helps buttress the argument for Jesus being the *true* Messiah.

This evangelist describes his John *the Witness* as “a voice crying in the wilderness,” a voice telling people to prepare for someone else, for someone greater than he. If last week we met “the camel-hair-wearing, locust and honey-eating John the Baptist, this week we do a 180 degree turn and meet a whole different John.” In Matthew, John “denounces his auditors as ‘snakes’ offspring’ and promises a cauterizing of their sins. Nor is John’s the reforming Baptist of Luke, telling soldiers to accept their wages. John’s Baptist says that Jesus will baptize only with Spirit, not with fire.” Though he does not baptize Jesus himself, he testifies “to the light coming into the world” as the Evangelist tells us in the Prologue (or opening poem).

He points to Jesus and says “Behold, did you see him? It’s the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” He points people to Jesus, because he knows his audience: *they don’t know* Jesus. That’s why in addressing the crowds, he says “Among you stands one you do not know.” What we learn from this is that for the Evangelist, the role of persuasion is critical in gaining advocates for one’s cause. “Witnesses are crucial to making a convincing proof of a historical event.” And this whole gospel is “aimed at persuading the reader (or hearer) of Jesus’ nature and person.”

John says that he is not worthy to “untie the thong of (the Messiah’s) sandal.” We are not certain why he places himself in such a subservient position. Some scholars posit that the early church had reason to downplay John’s role so as to emphasize the status of Jesus. In other words, John had his own following and was very well regarded so that after his execution he took on an almost holy reputation as a martyr which meant that his own position threatened that of Jesus the Messiah. In fact, at the beginning, “it was only John’s testimony that guided Jesus’ first followers,” so pivotal was his role as witness and testifier. The irony in this is that the Jesus movement looked back to John the Baptizer “as its launchpad.” But there were many who did not make the transition from followers of John to followers

of Jesus. It is certainly plausible to hold that “the writer, aware of such groups, is wanting to emphasize (in this passage) that John the Baptist insisted that people should follow Jesus, not himself. And he really meant it.”

On the other hand, it may be that the Evangelist simply wants to make clear that “*John is not any type of messianic figure.*” In one sense, he is a nobody, “just a voice who witnesses to the greater one.” John only relates the sign of the Messiahship of Jesus by saying he had witnessed the descent of the Holy Spirit when Jesus was baptized. That is a far cry, however, from actually baptizing the Messiah. So, again, the subservience of John appears to be an effort to downplay his role in order to elevate that of Jesus. In any case, this is the portrait of John the forerunner of the Messiah as described in the Fourth Gospel

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen

Sources

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